

Medium (un)specificity as material agency – the productive indeterminacy of matter/material.

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Abstract

In this article, I consider some of the debates brought to the fore by the proliferation of recent textile focused exhibitions; namely the tension between a continued allegiance to medium specific conventions and the richness, hybridity and heterogeneity afforded by the post-medium condition of contemporary art. Through a new body of sculptural and installational practice I propose a constellatory opening up of textile in which the medium specific can be (re)mapped in a fluid and fragmentary way. Drawing particular reference from Adorno's conception of the constellation and mimetic comportment, this model of practice involves a mode of behaviour that actively opens up to alterity and returns authority to the affective indeterminacy of the sensuously bound experiential encounter. This is manifest through a range of practice strategies - "thingness", "staged (dis)contiguity", and the play between "sensuous immediacy and corporeal containment" - which mobilise a precarious relationship between processes of attachment and detachment. Acknowledging the critical currency afforded to textile through feminist and poststructuralist critique, the work moves away from "a rhetoric of negative opposition" and predetermined discursive frameworks, returning authority to the aesthetic impulse, privileging the ambiguous resonances of an abstract sculptural language over more overt strategies of representation.

Keywords: Medium-specificity, textile, productive-indeterminacy, Adorno, constellation, mimesis, affect, material-agency.

Introduction

In his 1967 essay *Art and the Arts*, (Adorno 2003) written seven years after *Modernist Painting*, (O'Brian 1993, 85-93) Clement Greenberg's canonical treatise espousing the principles of medium specificity, Theodor Adorno states that "[i]mmunity to the zeitgeist is no virtue in itself" (Adorno 2003, 369) and uses the suitably appropriate textile metaphor "fraying" to describe the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries that was an inescapable consequence of the increasing hybridisation of the arts. According to Adorno, however, this fraying or erosion of disciplinary boundaries "has the greatest power, where it is intrinsic, that is to say, where it arises from the genre itself" (Adorno 2003, 369) and is only defensible if instigated by the "principle of construction" (Adorno 1984, 84) or internal logic of the discreet disciplines. The critical continuation of medium specific traditions as a point of departure for the generation of artworks is not borne of any desire to preserve the genres per se, but as he notes, because "there are inescapable constraints built into materials, constraints that change with the specific character of the material and which determine the evolution of methods" (Adorno 1984, 213). It was only through the continual critical interrogation of what he calls 'aesthetic material' (Jarvis 1998, 105) that the enigmatic tension necessary for the autonomy of art could be prevented from becoming subordinated under conceptual control and subsumed within convention.

In this article I discuss the development of a new body of work that articulates and embodies some of the debates brought to the fore by the *Entangled Threads and Making* exhibition and what has been something of a resurgence of interest in textile focused exhibitions over the last couple of years within contemporary art agendas. As an artist whose identity has been formulated in relation to my historical allegiance to textile materials and processes, the challenge raised in practice is how to embrace the creative freedom afforded by the post-modern/post-medium condition of contemporary art, whilst recognising the

significance of situated experience and the continuing validity of a practice grounded in a critical interrogation of material conventions.

Emerging out of a recent period of practice led research, this new body work marks a shift from a contingent positioning of the practice and a critical currency derived from the self-reflexive strategic negotiation of textile and fine art contexts, to a much more performative approach that returns authority to the affective indeterminacy of the experiential encounter as a formative and sensuous mode of knowledge production.

Motivated by material considerations and formal concerns, but at the same time making ambiguous reference to objects that are vaguely familiar, the work takes the form of a quasi-taxonomy of interchangeable sculptural components that are conceived in a way that can be configured and reconfigured within a series of staged *mises-en-scène*. This allows for a greater complexity where the somatic and semantic references of the work remain continually in flux, dictated by a temporary coalition of the discrete elements and the processually oriented experiential encounter of the viewer. Through the practice and accompanying research, I propose a constellatory opening up of textile through which the medium specific can be remapped in a fluid and fragmentary way and an overarching methodological and operational strategy that maintains a productive tension between processes of attachment *and* detachment.

In the account that follows I draw on Theodor Adorno's philosophical conception of the constellation (Adorno 2007, 162-163) as a model of non-hierarchical, heterogeneous connectivity. With its emphasis on inter-relationality, this allowed me to reconceive medium specificity as material agency and consider textile as a series of complex (im)material entanglements.

I also draw on Adorno's conception of mimetic comportment (Adorno, 1984) as "a mode of behaviour toward the other that also involves a loss of conscious self-direction (and)

a return to the knowing body” (Noland 2013, 182). It was this decentring of the self and active opening up alterity and the affective intensities of both artistic material and corporeal matter that was transformational for the practice.

The constellatory opening up of textile and cartographic remapping of the self that unfolded over the course of the research, developed in parallel to what has been an increasing interest in ‘new materialism’ (Coole, and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 2012; Barrett and Bolt 2013) and affect studies across the arts, humanities and social sciences (Massumi 2002; Clough and Halley, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). Both of these contexts are notable in marking a shift away from concerns with signification; placing an emphasis instead on the sentient body and vibrancy and vitality of bodily matter - and indeed matter in its broadest sense - as a self-organising and “transformative force *in itself*” (Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, 2012, 107).

So, while textile is, as Jennifer Harris states in the catalogue to the recent *Art_Textiles* exhibition, “having a moment” (Harris 2015, 8) and at last gaining more widespread critical recognition for its social, political and cultural significance, my new body of work is notable in returning authority to the aesthetic impulse and the affective indeterminacy of materially embodied experience. Within this more speculative approach, bodily intuitions, complicit formalism and the ambiguous resonances of an abstract sculptural language are privileged over the more overt subjective narratives and strategies of representation. My proposition is that within this state of what I describe as ‘productive indeterminacy’, hierarchical binary formulations become untenable, disciplinary boundaries become blurred, meaning is suggested but unable to settle and fundamental categorical divisions between subject and object are destabilised.

A qualitative transformation: from the strategic positioning of practice to a broader affirmative material sensibility

The point of departure for my research was a body of practice established over a ten-year period which harnessed the processes, materials and accompanying discourses of plain sewing within the context of a minimalist aesthetic. Increasingly informed by feminist and poststructuralist critique, what started off as an aesthetic response, over the course of time developed into a more contingent positioning of the practice and a self-reflexive subversion of the ideological discourses through which textile had been traditionally marginalised. This strategy of cultural positioning functioned within a structuralist grid that “was conceived as an oppositional framework of culturally constructed significations” (Massumi 2002, 2) where textile’s boundary position became a site for resistance, used in a strategic way to unsettle seeming stable identities. However, what was undoubtedly a personally empowering strategy, in time began to be creatively limiting. Dependent on my ability to come up with ever more variations on the themes of minimalism and plain sewing and dictated by a predetermined discursive context and conceptual understanding of the cultural codes that were set in play, I found myself backed into a corner as the work became subsumed by its own agenda. As Brian Massumi observes:

The idea of positionality begins by subtracting movement from the picture. This catches the body in cultural freeze-frame. This point of explanatory departure is a pinpointing, a zero–point of stasis. When positioning of any kind comes a determining first, movement comes a problematic second...Movement is entirely subordinated to the positions it connects. These are predefined...The very notion of movement as qualitative transformation is lacking. There is "displacement," but no transformation (Massumi 2002, 3).

The critical currency afforded to textile was also still premised on what Johanna Drucker describes as a “rhetoric of negative opposition” (Drucker 2005, 68) where textile remained the

devalued term in the subversion of binary conventions. Drucker suggests that this rhetoric of negative opposition “has itself become formulaic and conventionalised...promoted through academic discourse and criticism which imposes predictable prescriptive categories on works of art and seeks examples that fulfil those preconceived categories” (Drucker 2005, 14). I would suggest that as is the case with any artistic genre where the content is derived from the specific material conventions of the medium - the danger is that what is distinctive can easily become exhausted to the point of becoming “discursively saturated” (Bernstein 1992, 198).

The opening up of historical, social and cultural categories to the test of their own history problematised boundaries and afforded a critical re-positioning. But on the whole, these were discursively constituted boundaries where the very matter/material substance of the body dissolved under a preoccupation with the textual and signifying registers of cultural production. As Brian Massumi observes: the discursive body can make sense through its signifying gestures and “[i]f properly “performed,” they may also unmake sense by scrambling significations... but they don't sense” (Massumi 2002, 2).

Affective contagion: opening up to the productive indeterminacy of the experiential encounter

The qualitative transformation that effectively derailed and subsequently rerouted my practice was the affective intensity of a series of sensuously bound encounters with the work of other artists; notably amongst them, Clare Barclay, Thea Djordjadze, Magali Reus and Tatiana Trouvé. So different was this work to my own reductive visual vocabulary that I had initially dismissed it as a point of reference, but what I increasingly couldn't ignore was how perplexingly exhilarated I felt in its presence.

Here were artists who were not bound by an allegiance to a particular medium, to political contingency or the strategic subversion of binary oppositions, but who seemed to embrace a much more affirmative sensibility. Adopting a rigorously formal aesthetic language, their

work displays an “uninhibited engagement with material pleasure” (Drucker 2005, xi) and a much more playful mixing of codes which abounds with sensual suggestiveness, while at the same time resisting signification and encouraging open ended interpretation. A commitment to making and materiality appear to remain primary considerations, but there is no fetishisation of the handmade and indeed what seems to be an unabashed complicity with the seductive qualities of mass production and commodities of consumer desire. I found myself equally entranced and potentially destabilised by this work. It was work that materially impinged on the body and seduced and defied conceptual synthesis in equal measure. I was excited by it precisely because I couldn’t get a handle on it and it couldn’t be reduced to well-rehearsed predetermined contexts. Its sheer indeterminacy provoked the search for meaning, yet the richness of its contradictory resonances resisted subjective synthesis as any search for conceptual coherence was overwhelmed by the obdurate material presence of the work.

Drawing on the Spinoza (1982), Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and Massumi (2002) lineage of affect, Simon O’Sullivan (O’Sullivan 2006) argues that this paradoxical experience of what he describes as “rupture and affirmation” arises through an encounter wherein “our typical ways of being in the world are challenged, our systems of knowledge disrupted. We are forced to thought” (O’Sullivan 2006, 1). The experience is rupturing in the sense that the encounter produces a “cut” or “crack” in what O’Sullivan suggests is “our habitual modes of being and thus our habitual subjectivities” (O’Sullivan 2006, 1); and affirmative in the sense that this active broadening of the self to the other, or what Brian O’Connor describes as “a thrilling disengagement from the requirements of socially effective selfhood” (O’Connor 2013, 170) opens us up to something new and expands imaginative possibilities. O’Sullivan describes this unsettling relationship between rupture and affirmation as an “affective gap” (O’Sullivan 2006, 38) suggesting that “[i]t is in this gap then that genuine events emerge” (O’Sullivan 2006, 38).

What is often described as the ‘affective turn’ (Clough and Halley 2007) within cultural theory within the mid-1990s, was in many ways seen to be in response to what were perceived to be the limitations of the linguistic, psychological and sociological models of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Affect is the name given to the vitality of matter as it registers as intensity within the body. Blurring boundaries between self and other and exceeding reason and rationality, affect points to the instability of the body, undermining any notion of a self-contained rational subject. As affirmation of the body’s unfolding relational complexity in a perpetual state of becoming, these bodily intensities are mobilised by its own processual materiality and infinite potential for variation. They are paradoxical in that they simultaneously reaffirm a sense of self and mark “the subject’s discontinuity with itself” (Clough 2010, 206). Gregg and Seigworth eloquently describe affect “as a gradient of bodily capacity – a supple incrementalism of ever modulating force relations – that...accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 2). From the Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi philosophical perspective, affect is variously characterised as pre-personal, trans-subjective, pre-cognitive; a resonance of unmediated bodily intensity that is “immanent to matter” and “immanent to experience” (O’Sullivan 2006, 41) and is hard wired into the body. Affective intensity is “[t]he feeling of having a feeling” (Massumi 2002, 14) but the nature of this feeling is difficult to articulate and is often deemed to be autonomous and removed from intentionality and cognition. Massumi stresses this autonomy, making a distinction between intensity and emotion, which he describes as “qualified intensity”. Indeed, once we register affect cognitively - once it is “owned and recognised” - it becomes something else, absorbed into wider semiotic and semantic circuits of meaning (Massumi 2002, 28).

This first-hand experience of the rupturing and affirmative dimension of affect was liberating and prompted a significant shift in attitude towards my practice and the subsequent

focus of my studio enquiry. In the first instance, it provided a welcome amnesty from the over conceptual rationalisation that had dominated the early stages of the research and an urgent desire to get back into the studio. It seemed to grant me permission to embrace the complexity and contradictions of the multiple visual and material culture contexts from which my work drew its references and a level of confidence to trust to the ‘material intelligence’ (Fisher 2009) of making. It prompted a much more affirmative, speculative and open-ended process-led approach guided by a response to aesthetic impulses where I was able to embrace unformulated sensations, uncertainty and the pre-and non-rational aspects of my practice. By no longer conceptually predetermining the outcome but responding to the work as it emerged, I found myself simultaneously destabilised and enlivened by the constant sense of surprise as subjective intention and the material logic of the work itself became entangled in a process of productive co-constitution. Significantly, it gave me licence to open up to heterogeneity and embrace a much broader material sensibility. My concern became less about trying to rationalise the work in terms of what is specific to the medium of textile and more about its material agency and the somatic and semantic entanglements that it facilitates. As Giuliana Bruno argues, “materiality is not a question of materials but rather concerns the subject of material relations” (Bruno 2014, 2). Acknowledging that in its quotidian contexts textile rarely operates in isolation, I was able to reconceive it as “a site of multiple, complex and potentially contradictory” connections (Braidotti 1994, 4) that was mobilised as part of a larger constellatory network.

A constellatory approach to practice

This reconfiguration of medium specificity in terms of material agency was manifest in practice as a series of interchangeable components that could be continually assembled and reassembled. Drawing initial stimulus from the everyday material culture contexts of textile

and Howard Risatti's analysis of applied function as "cover", "container" or "support" (Risatti 2007, 32), the sculptural components included textile and non-textile materials, the handmade and the industrially fabricated. The development of this operational strategy marked a significant shift in approach; prompting a move from what had previously been a concern with a predetermined outcome where the location of the meaning of the work was inherent within the individual object, to the privileging of process and inter-relationship.



Figure 1 Interchangeable sculptural components conceived in a way that can be configured and reconfigured.

Offering the opportunity for continual rearrangement, the physical form of the work remains essentially mutable, materialised through the temporary coalition of the discrete sculptural components within a changing series of staged *mises-en-scène*. Meaning similarly remains mutable, mobilised through the various correspondences set in play across the different elements and the subject of the experiential encounter. There is still a level of control in the

making of the individual elements, but at the same time, a greater degree of spontaneity as the production of the work moves from the security of the studio to a process of performed improvisation within the space of display. Inspired by interior styling, the aesthetic staging of the everyday within retail display and the functional environment from which they derive their influence, these components were eventually documented in the form of a four-metre long concertina-style quasi retail catalogue, which provides the classificatory grounding from which the constellatory staging of the work takes its measure.



Figure 2 Test documentation for quasi taxonomy of components: “*Concordance*” *Component configuration 26713-M156ER*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, July 29–Sept 1, 2013

Figure 3 Taxonomy of components documented in the form of a 4-metre long concertina-style quasi retail catalogue, June 2016.

https://issuu.com/artanddesignatchester/docs/maxine_bristow_concertina2

This was accompanied by a 68-page A4 perfect-bound catalogue which documented the (re)staging of the various sculptural components within different installational scenarios and exhibition contexts.

https://issuu.com/artanddesignatchester/docs/maxine_bristow_a4_brochurev2



Figure 4 Installation: *“Transformations”*: Component (re)configuration 121012-CH22LB, CASC Contemporary Art Space Chester, Oct 12–Nov 2, 2012.



Figure 5 Installation: *“Concordance”* Component (re)configuration 23913-CH22LB, CASC Contemporary Art Space Chester, Sept 23 – Oct 28, 2013.



Figure 6 Installation: *“Concordance”* Component (re)configuration 23913-CH22LB, CASC Contemporary Art Space Chester Sept 23–Oct 28, 2013.



Figure 7 Installation: *Component configuration 010914-CH22LB*, Studio Space, University of Chester, Sept 1–Oct 26, 2014.



Figure 8 Installation: *Component configuration 010914-CH22LB*, Studio Space, University of Chester, Sept 1–Oct 26, 2014.



Figure 9 Installation: *Component configuration 010914-CH22LB*, Studio Space, University of Chester, Sept 1–Oct 26, 2014.



Figure 10 Installation: *Component configuration 010914-CH2 2LB*, Studio Space, University of Chester, Sept 1–Oct 26, 2014.



Figure 11 Installation: *Attach/Detach Component configuration 070416-CH22LB*, CASC Contemporary Art Space Chester, April 7–April 15, 2016.



Figure 12 Installation: *Attach/Detach Component configuration 070416-CH22LB*, CASC Contemporary Art Space Chester, April 7–April 15, 2016.

From its emergence as a practical operational strategy, a theoretical encounter with Theodor Adorno's philosophical conception of the constellation (Adorno 2007) prompted its development as a broader conceptual framework for the research and structural rationale for the organisation of my doctoral thesis. Borrowing the term from Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1998), Adorno developed the notion of the constellation as a model of heterogeneous inter-relationality where elements are mobilised through productive correspondence. The constellational, or what Benjamin also described as the 'configurational' form, allows for the clustering of diverse phenomena within an open network of relations where no one element has primacy over the other. Within this non-hierarchical system, a distinction is made between what Adorno described as "identity thinking" (Adorno 2007) where objects are subsumed and contained under concepts, and the nature of 'truth', which is seen to emerge spontaneously from a constantly evolving constellatory arrangement. Accordingly, the constellation is less concerned with determining the nature of objects than with the sensuous and conceptual connections that they facilitate. The constellation is a fluid model where meaning is not predetermined and fixed but emerges through a complex network of convergences and divergences that momentarily coalesce to produce new relationships. For Adorno, objects within the constellation "remain[s] ever mobile, mediated, in a state of becoming" (Mussell 2011, 32). With the emphasis on relationality, difference and heterogeneity is preserved; "[t]he range of concepts that are gathered around a thing "illuminates" or gives insight into that thing" (Stone 2008, 58), yet they can only give us partial insight. Whilst the configuration of heterogeneous elements within the constellation potentially shed light on the phenomena around which they are gathered, they can never fully reveal the particular uniqueness of the phenomena. Difference cannot be reduced to or assimilated within some universal principle or identity. As Martin Jay observes, the constellation signifies "a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that

resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle” (Jay 1984, 14-15).

For Adorno, it is not only the constellation of external relations that impinge on the object which make it simultaneously apprehensible and resistant to categorisation; but in a second sense of constellation, “Adorno suggests that each object is *itself* a constellation of different past relations with other objects, all which have shaped it” (Stone 2008, 59). Objects are accumulations of diverse contexts set in relation over time and as such become sedimented with historical content. Constellations are therefore simultaneously external to the object, determined by an opening up to the other/outside, formulated through difference, and inherent within what Adorno describes as the ‘material particularity’ or ‘non-identity’ of the object (Adorno 2007). It is in this double sense of the constellation that the material particularity of the object transcends representation and universalising concepts and can never be exhaustively understood. Adorno's is a materialist model within which the complex constellatory nature of objects cannot be subsumed by the subject. According to Adorno, it is in this tension between the momentary sensuous attachment and self-reflexive conceptual detachment that the limitations of subjective agency are revealed and it is through this (dis)connection between mind and body that the affective potency of aesthetic experience emerges.

Mimetic comportment: opening up to alterity

Shierry Weber Nicholsen suggests that what is foundational to the constellation and central to Adorno's aesthetic theory is his particularly illusive and undefined conception of mimesis (Weber Nicholsen 1997, 83). Further, I propose that Adorno's account of mimetic comportment could usefully contribute to existing theories of affect and provides a compelling reflective framework for the processes of attachment and detachment that are

activated through the practice.

For Adorno, art serves as “a refuge for mimetic behaviour” (Adorno 1984, 79). Within artistic production and aesthetic receptivity, the mimetic impulse is manifest through a sensuous re-enactment and empathic mode of connectivity where the artist/viewer actively assimilates with the material otherness of the work. It is a process whereby “one particular (the subject) appropriates another particular (the object) by likening itself to it” (Bernstein 1992, 201) without the need to dominate it through the subjective mastery of conceptual identification. Mimetic comportment is a mode of behaviour that is formulated around a highly sensuous correspondence that resists rigid divisions between subject and object where boundaries remain mobile and permeable. Central the mimetic process is an active opening up and broadening of the self to the other that involves a form of surrender or a sense of yielding which overturns the priority of the subject. Mimetic behaviour in Adorno’s terms, “does not imitate something but assimilates itself to that something” (Adorno, 1984, 162) where the subject actively adjusts to the objective world rather than reflects it in its own image. In place of a narcissistic mirroring which serves to reinforce the ego, the mimetic experience undermines its authority and involves what Gebauer and Wulf describe as a subjective “transcendence toward the world, where fixed identity dissolves, reason itself is held in abeyance, and the subject is disempowered” (Gebauer and Wulf, 1992, 287). Accordingly, in the sense in which Adorno uses the term, mimesis is a paradoxical concept which both shores up the self by facilitating a process of connectivity whilst simultaneously underlining the precarious nature of modern subjectivity by threatening its dissolution.

The active broadening of the self to the other that is central to mimetic comportment has a synthesising function that renders the contradictory and divergent articulate, but it operates in a very different way to conceptual understanding and logical synthesis. Jay Bernstein describes Adorno’s conception of mimesis as “a critical reinscription of intuition”

(Bernstein 1992, 201) which is language-like in its communicative potential, yet at the same time it exceeds discursive language and cannot be reduced to signification. Mimetic comportment is “epistemological” insofar as it is a “feeling laced with cognition” (Elkins and Montgomery 2013, 74). It runs contrary to what Neil Leach's describes as “knowledge-as-quantification” (Leach 2006, 23) exemplified in practices of classification and categorisation typical of enlightened modernity which seek to control and contain inner and outer nature by subsuming matter/material under generalising universal abstract concepts. Instead, the mode of “knowledge-as-sensuous correspondence” (Leach 2006; 23) proposed through Adorno's conception of mimesis, is a non-subsumptive synthesis that seeks to keep alive the non-identical and allows access to the material domain in all its sensuous material particularity; aspects that Adorno would suggest have increasingly become covered over or lost through processes of instrumental rationalisation.

Reconfiguring aesthetic autonomy

For Adorno, this material otherness or ‘non-identity’ is most effectively articulated in art by virtue of its characteristic autonomy. Understandably, since the 1960s, any notion of autonomy is a position that clearly can no longer be sustained. This is particularly so from the perspective of textile, whose material culture conventions and embeddedness within the everyday, mean that its ontological identity is suffused with socio historical content.

However, aesthetic autonomy is not understood here in its Greenbergian sense where it is seen to be a direct property of the self-referential artistic medium or an evident criteria of production; instead, as Julianne Rebentisch observes, artworks “become aesthetic by virtue of that which within them cannot be conceptualised or grasped as an idea, a concept, a strategy, or a technique” (Rebentisch 2009, 124). For Adorno, the critical function of art derives out of this contradiction of its autonomous status. It is on the one hand a social product whose

autonomy is produced and sustained through the institutionalisation of art, and on the other hand, constitutes a unique form of experience - the aesthetic - that resists absorption by the system within which it is a product.

The paradoxical nature of aesthetic autonomy is that if artworks fail to register their aesthetic artifice they just become part of empirical reality, yet if they stand apart from the everyday, their critical function is diminished. Johanna Drucker asserts that it is self-reflective conspicuous artifice that provides the potent mechanism that prompts in our imaginations reflection on the relationship between reality and the constructed nature of reality, and as such constitutes the very essence of artistic activity (Drucker 2005, 9). As she deftly articulates, “(t)hrough an aesthetic appeal to the eye and senses, fine art achieves its effect. Through its artifice, it shows the constructed-ness of its condition - and ours” (Drucker 2005, xiii).

Reconceiving aesthetic autonomy in terms of ‘constructed artifice’ she also usefully releases formalism from its Greenbergian ideological overtones of purity and aesthetic value through her notion of ‘complicit formalism’, suggesting that:

Complicit formalism counters the very basis on which autonomy could be assumed, while returning respect for the aesthetic properties of works of art ... to a central place within our understanding of the ways art works through constructed artifice (Drucker 2005, xvi).

Practice strategies: mobilising subjective continuity and discontinuity

Having considered some of the experiential encounters, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks that had prompted a significant attitudinal and operational shift in my approach to the work, I draw my reflections to a close by briefly outlining three practice strategies: ‘thingness’, ‘staged (dis)contiguity’ and the tension between ‘sensuous immediacy and corporeal containment’, which I employ as a way of maintaining a more mimetic sensibility.

Fundamental to the development of these studio strategies is a desire to embrace the productive indeterminacy of the experiential encounter, from both my own position as an artist and from the perspective of the viewer. The aim is to open up an affective gap that continually oscillates between processes that mobilise a constellation of somatic and semantic connections and reaffirm subjective stability, but at the same time produce an ambiguity of feeling that puts this stability at risk.

Thingness

“Thingness” emerges as a productive strategy with which to blur boundaries between the autonomous fine art conventions of “objecthood” (Fried 1998) and the everyday “objectness” that is ontological to material culture. With its sense of familiarity yet resistance to interpretation - the part-object known but not known - the ambiguous non-identity of thingness provided a means of maintaining a productive tension between the aesthetic autonomy and the extra aesthetic dimensions of the practice. As an operational studio strategy, it is the particular enigmatic familiar unfamiliarity of thingness that is useful in mobilising the rich field of references and cultural codes and historical legacies within textile is entangled. Privileging resonance over representation, this medium (*un*)specificity prompts associations that gather around and illuminate the constellatory taxonomy of sculptural components but they remain unspecifiable and semantically unstable.

In the introduction to his edited collection entitled *Things* (2004), Bill Brown makes a distinction between objects and things, suggesting that objects are delimited by concepts and cultural codes through which they become recognisable and meaningful. Things on the other hand, exist in a suspended form of identity, in reference to the object but not in a way as to be able to necessarily identify it. Connoting a simultaneous sense of the general and particular, things operate on the threshold and suggest a liminality where they are immediately graspable

but at the same time elude comprehension. As Brown observes: “(t)emporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)” (Brown 2004, 5). According to Brown, “the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (Brown 2004, 4).

Joanna Drucker proposes “thingness” as a term that usefully updates Michael Fried’s notion of objecthood and is more appropriate for the current nature of contemporary fine art practice; suggesting that it promotes a new form of theatricality that is “far more connected to and complicit with the cultural world” (Drucker 2005, 160). As she observes:

In contrast with minimalism’s “objecthood,” the concept of “thingness” links sculpture to objects in and of the world in a combination of traditional arts, conceptualised contemporary art, and mass culture production... The category depends on the intersection between the world of things that are irrefutably and indisputably a part of material culture and those that are in the world of art. Rather than preserving the thin dividing line that minimalism relied on to separate these domains, these new works aggressively blur those boundaries. In capitulating to material culture, they embody its most phantasmatic properties: continually deferred possession, seductive contemplation, and endlessly displaced signification (Drucker 2005, 157).

Staged (Dis)contiguity

The practice strategy of staging shifts the status of the work from a self-contained entity to a process of “enactment” where the installation format of the work becomes “a stage set” for an unfolding experiential encounter. Reconceived in terms of an event, the artist, the object, the *mise en scène* and the beholder of the work are all set in play, becoming entangled in an ever-mobile constellatory network of inter-relationality.

Staging can be understood from a number of perspectives. Firstly as a broader operational strategy and mode of production that is inherent in the conception of the work as a series of interchangeable components and the subsequent more performative approach to the

practice. Secondly, as a specific formal method and aesthetic framing device that I employ within the work to assert constructed artifice and delineate and detach the practice components from empirical reality and their everyday material culture counterparts. Drawing reference from modernist framing devices and the aesthetic staging of the everyday in museums of cultural ethnography, interior styling and retail display, the use of the tableau format, platforms, plinths, linear frameworks and self-conscious formal arrangement, provide a way of foregrounding the usually “invisible” quotidian contexts of material culture, distilling them from the immediacy of everyday experience. This aesthetic attachment *to* and detachment *from* the everyday, arguably activates a paradoxical feeling, where strategies of staging simultaneously arrest attention *and* distance the viewer. Thirdly, the work stages an indeterminate phenomenological experiential encounter for the beholder through its installational format. As Claire Bishop observes: “what installation art offers, then, is an experience of centring and decentring: work that insists on our centred presence in order then to subvert us to an experience of decentring” (Bishop 2005, 130). Fourthly, staging is understood in terms of the cultural framing of the work and the various exhibition contexts in which it is displayed, where the constellatory inter-relationships mobilised by the work are opened up to even greater complexity.

An aesthetic of containment, countering sensuous immediacy

The final practice strategy of “sensuous immediacy and corporeal containment” derives from the medium specific conventions of textile and the way in which its inherent material characteristics give rise to a haptic aesthetic and a subsequent heightened sensuous immediacy and subjective attachment. This is set against the “detached presence” (Fer 2004, 114) of my own visual vocabulary where sensuous immediacy is continually kept in check. The regulated and contained sensuality of my own work does not imply an absence of feeling

but is employed both as a way of resisting easy dualities and a means concentrating and intensifying aesthetic experience. The strategies of containment and regulation present the work in a state of latency waiting to be activated by the viewer.

Moving away from aesthetic approaches that privilege material excess, the work presents a materially measured body. It is a body that is well toned and trimmed, where the fluidity of cloth is continually brought under control. Upholstered forms are tightly tailored; the flow of fabric is regulated into neatly gathered curtains; or even when loosely draped, is staged with the same formality as the carefully composed swagged drapes of Renaissance painting. Cut edges are hemmed and bound, and compact cushioned panels and pads are fitted neatly into protective timber frames. Where materials other than cloth are used, we have empty carcasses and casings that are hardened, stripped of any excess flesh and “close to the bone”. The supple flexibility of hardboard is placed under tension and securely pinned in place; the interior skeletal frames of upholstered forms are divested of their softening protective covers; loose fibres and cushioned forms are petrified in plaster; and plinths and pedestals are fitted edge to edge with clinical wipe-clean laminate. Instead of an expressive body that articulates overt subjective narratives, we have a self-effacing practical functioning body, ergonomically designed for efficiency and comfort. Furniture components standardised to the average dimensions of the body provide reassuring support, handles and cushioned grips allow for ease of control, quasi tools hint at possible practical use, and metal frameworks suggest strange gym-like apparatus.

The seemingly coolly detached restraint of the work is perhaps most evident in the all-pervading greyness of its palette. This affords a strange sterile artifice of unchanging sameness which sets it apart from the chaotic chromatic variety of its quotidian counterparts, but at the same time accentuates the material qualities of the work. As David Batchelor (Batchelor 2014, 196-7) observes, grey is paradoxical, prompting associations such as boring,

characterless or non-descript but also with more productive terms such as neutral, ambiguous and uncertain Finding a correspondence with Roland Barthes conception of the Neutral (Barthes 2005), “the neutrally inflected aesthetic” of the work becomes a space of immanent potential where the slightest nuance of difference registers as a progressive amplification or diminution of intensity (Barthes 2005, 196-7).

Whilst the practice presents a materially-measured, functioning body and a seeming complicity with modernist protocols of reduction and rationality, it is not a simple strategy of subversion or reversal. Instead, strategies of control and containment are continually set in play against the sensory immediacy of the work as a means of heightening the affective indeterminacy of the experiential encounter.

Conclusion

Whilst I welcome the increasing curatorial interest in textile and the long overdue recognition of its social, political and cultural significance as a medium of representation, what was transformative in terms of my own practice was a return to the aesthetic impulse and an opening up to the affective indeterminacy of materially embodied experience as a sensuous and formative mode of knowledge production. This is not to deny social significance or political efficacy or the lack of self-determined subjective agency, but to acknowledge what Diana Coole describes as a “spectrum of agential capacities” (Coole 2005, 125) and Andrew Pickering describes as the “back-and-forth dance of human and non-human agency” (Pickering 2010, 195); both of which recognise the agency of matter/material as a force that exceeds the limitations of subjective intentions.

The mimetic comportment that is fundamental to Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory offers what Jay Bernstein describes as “a critical epistemology,...an alternative form of reasoning, making and knowing the world” (Elkins & Montgomery 2013, 71); that does not

seek to subsume the material particularity of the object under some universal concept but maintains what Adorno describes as the “preponderance of the object”. (Adorno 2007, 183) and addresses it in all its sensuous fullness and complexity.

The constellatory opening up of textile that emerged through the development of my new body of work and accompanying research, seeks to acknowledge this complexity. It is through its specific (un)specificity and potential as a medium of convergence and divergence that textile has been seen to challenge the fundamental premise of self-contained artist categories and disciplinary boundaries, blurring distinctions between subject and object and bridging gaps between realms that customarily remain separate and distinct. The work never loses sight of textile but embraces a much broader material sensibility, where the medium has become detached and decentred to the point where it is now the all-pervading absent presence at the heart of the constellation.

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